Table of Contents

1. FelipxA'TIN love story

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[image]

Chapter 1: The Unexpected Meeting

The roar of the arena after soundcheck was a constant, low vibration that Ken could usually filter out. Between lighting cues, blocking rehearsals, and the relentless flash of fan cameras, VIP engagements often blurred together into a dizzying parade of eager faces and rehearsed greetings. Ken loved the stage, but the noise of it had a way of wearing thin on long afternoons.

Then came Joaquin.

He hadn't screamed Ken's name or clutched a banner with trembling fingers. When Joaquin stepped up to the acrylic barrier during the VIP hi-touch session, he had simply paused, meeting Ken's gaze with a calm, unbothered warmth that cut straight through the surrounding chaos. He was tall, dressed in a tailored charcoal over-shirt over an open-collared black tee, with sharp jawline definition and eyes that held an easy, perceptive amusement.

"The acoustic bridge in your recent solo track," Joaquin had said, his deep, smooth voice cutting cleanly through the ambient chatter. "You modulated the key down half a step live today. It gave the lower register far more grit than the studio cut. It worked."

Ken had blinked, caught off guard. Most fans used their fleeting seconds to confess their love or ask for a specific pose; Joaquin had analyzed his vocal arrangement like someone who actually listened to the silence between the beats.

"You noticed that?" Ken asked, a rare, genuine grin pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"Hard to miss when you're paying attention," Joaquin replied smoothly. Before the security staff could usher him along, he laid a small, heavy-stock print on the table—a striking, minimalist

photograph of an empty stage bathed in amber dusk light, captured with the eye of a seasoned visual artist. On the back, handwritten in clean, sharp ink, was an Instagram handle and a single sentence: *For the quiet moments.*

Ken slipped the card into his back pocket before Pablo or the staff could sweep it into the general gift bins.

That night, alone in his room long after midnight, Ken found himself looking up the account. Joaquin Reyes wasn't just a fan; he was an architectural photographer and creative director in his late twenties whose portfolio was full of brutalist concrete, moody shadows, and deliberate, quiet beauty.

Ken had hesitated for barely five seconds before sending a message from his private alt account:

The lighting in that photograph was ridiculous. You shot that in Araneta?

Joaquin's response had come three minutes later:

Guilty. Glad it survived the security sweep.

What began as sporadic, cautious messages quickly spiraled into late-night exchanges that stretched until dawn. Ken was notoriously guarded with strangers, but Joaquin had a rare balance of reverence and irreverence. He respected Ken's work without putting him on a pedestal. When Ken sent him rough, unpolished beat demos, Joaquin gave honest critiques about pacing and mood. When Joaquin was stuck in endless editing suites, Ken sent dry, sarcastic commentary about his own grueling choreography rehearsals.

Joaquin was grounded, self-assured, and possessed a razor-sharp wit that effortlessly disarmed Ken's usual defenses. He was someone Ken didn't have to perform for.

Three weeks of texting culminated in a spontaneous message on a rare Tuesday off:

I'm home today. No schedules, no cameras. Come over.

When the intercom buzzed at four in the afternoon, Ken opened the door to find Joaquin standing in the hallway. In the muted corridor light, he looked even more striking than Ken remembered—broad-shouldered in a soft ivory linen shirt with rolled-up sleeves, dark hair casually swept back, and a bottle of chilled craft cider in hand.

"You're taller in person," Joaquin noted, a slow, appreciative smile curving his lips as his gaze swept over Ken.

Ken was dressed in loose sweatpants and an over-sized vintage tee, completely un-styled, but the intense, dark-eyed confidence that commanded stages was unmistakably present. "And you're late. By four minutes."

"Traffic on EDSA," Joaquin said without missing a beat, stepping past him into the condo. "Besides, anticipation builds character."

The atmosphere inside the apartment was quiet, modern, and private. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over the sprawling city skyline, the afternoon sun casting long, golden geometric shadows across the polished concrete floors and low-profile leather couch.

For the first hour, the conversation flowed with the same natural cadence they had built over text. They drank, talked about sound engineering and visual composition, and debated the merits of vintage synthesizers. But as the sun began to dip, casting the living room in warm, intimate twilight, the unspoken current between them grew impossible to ignore.

Joaquin was leaning back against the cushions, listening intently as Ken played an unreleased acoustic riff through his phone speakers. Every time Ken leaned in to point out a subtle harmony, their shoulders brushed. The casual contact sent an electric spike through the air.

"It needs something warmer here," Joaquin murmured, turning his head. His face was only inches away from Ken's now. His gaze dropped briefly to Ken's lips before rising back to his eyes, steady and deliberate. "Something that lingers."

"Like what?" Ken asked, his voice dropping an octave, low and

gravelly.

"Like you don't want it to end," Joaquin whispered.

The air between them pulled taut. Ken set the phone on the coffee table, his movements deliberate. He didn't look away from Joaquin for a single second. The playfulness that usually laced their banter melted into something heavy, concentrated, and undeniably magnetic.

"You talk a lot," Ken murmured, leaning closer until Joaquin could feel the heat radiating from him.

"Only when I have something worth saying," Joaquin replied softly, raising a hand to lightly trace the line of Ken's jaw, his fingers warm against Ken's skin.

Ken's breath caught, a spark of dark heat igniting behind his eyes as he tilted his head into the touch, closing the final inch between them.

When their lips met, the low hum of the city outside dissolved into absolute stillness.

Ken kissed the way he moved on stage—deliberate, magnetic, and commanding—yet there was an unhurried gentleness to the way his mouth parted against Joaquin's. Joaquin met him with an effortless heat of his own, his fingers sliding from Ken's jaw into the thick hair at the nape of his neck, tilting Ken's head to deepen the angle.

A quiet, shuddering breath escaped Ken as he leaned in heavier, bracing one hand against the leather backrest behind Joaquin and sliding the other along Joaquin's shoulder, feeling the warm, solid muscle under the soft linen. The kiss was slow-burning and intoxicative, tasting of spiced craft cider and electric adrenaline. When Joaquin pulled Ken just a fraction closer, Ken let out a low rumble in the back of his throat, completely surrendering to the pull.

When they finally broke apart, their foreheads rested against one another in the dimming twilight. Both of their breaths came shallow

and uneven.

"Still think it needs something that lingers?" Ken murmured, his lips brushing Joaquin's with every syllable, his dark eyes glittering with satisfaction.

Joaquin let out a soft, breathless laugh, his thumb gently grazing Ken's cheekbone. "I think that arrangement was pretty much perfect."

The banter between them softened into an easy, intimate quiet. For the rest of the evening, there were no stage lights, no frantic production schedules, and no barriers. Sitting side by side on the low couch under the amber glow of the city skyline, they talked well past midnight—sharing the private vulnerabilities and quiet ambitions they never showed the rest of the world. By the time Joaquin finally stood by the entryway to leave in the early hours of the morning, the unspoken understanding between them had solidified.

"Same time next week?" Joaquin asked, adjusting his jacket with a slow, knowing smile.

Ken leaned against the doorway, arms crossed and nodded.

Chapter 2: Unscheduled Guests

Three weeks later, the mid-afternoon sun baked the pavement outside Ken's high-rise condominium.

Down in the lobby elevator, four men were crammed into the mirrored cab, engaged in an argument that had started all the way from their management office.

"I'm telling you, he didn't answer the group chat because he's sleeping," Stell insisted, dramatically waving a plastic bag full of takeout containers. "The man operates like a nocturnal feline. We shouldn't be disturbing his sacred slumber without an offering of iced coffee."

"He said he was free today," Pablo reasoned, checking his watch with focused efficiency. "We need to finalize the choreography

spacing for next month before the production meeting tomorrow. Dropping by with lunch is being practical, not disruptive."

"Practical?" Josh smirked, leaning casually against the elevator handrail with his arms crossed and an amused glint in his eye. "You just wanted an excuse to see if he actually cleaned his kitchen like he promised three weeks ago."

"I am the leader; maintaining harmony and hygiene in this team is within my job description," Pablo said smoothly, though the slight twitch of his eyebrow betrayed him.

Justin, standing quietly near the buttons, gave a small, perceptive smile. "He read my message twenty minutes ago. He's definitely awake. He just left us on read."

"See? Disrespect!" Stell gasped, pressing a hand to his chest. "We are bringing him high-grade pork belly and he gives us blue checks. The audacity."

When the elevator chimed on Ken's floor, Pablo led the procession down the carpeted hallway toward Ken's unit. Because the members had frequented the apartment countless times over the years, Pablo didn't even hesitate at the digital lock. With the practiced muscle memory of someone who treated the keypad like a speed-dial, he punched in the master passcode.

The digital lock chimed a cheerful four-tone melody and clicked open.

"Ken! We brought food, so you better be—" Pablo began, swinging the heavy oak door open and stepping boldly into the foyer.

The words died instantly in his throat.

Inside the sun-drenched living room, the atmosphere was thick, quiet, and profoundly interrupted.

The low leather couch in the center of the room was currently occupied. Ken was lounging back against the cushions, his dark hair disheveled, completely shirtless, with one long leg hooked casually over the edge of the sofa. Straddling his lap, broad shoulders

framed by the golden afternoon light and equally shirtless, was Joaquin.

Neither of them had been paying the slightest attention to the front door. Joaquin's hands were firmly planted on Ken's chest, leaning down into a kiss so deep, sensual, and unhurried that it looked like a high-fashion editorial frozen in time.

In the doorway, the four members slammed into a collective, paralyzed halt.

The plastic takeout bag in Stell's hand slipped three inches before his fingers clamped onto it in sheer, white-knuckled terror. His jaw dropped so low it threatened to detach from his skull. His eyes went wide as saucers, darting from Ken's bare torso to the strikingly handsome stranger currently occupying his lap.

"D-Diyos ko..." Stell squeaked, his voice cracking straight into a stratospheric high C. He threw a frantic hand over his eyes, only to immediately part his fingers to peek right back through them. "Pablo! Pablo, my eyes! What are we looking at?!"

Pablo looked like his internal operating system had suffered a catastrophic blue-screen error. His mouth opened, closed, opened again, but no recognizable human language came out. His ears turned an alarming shade of crimson as his gaze darted desperately toward the ceiling, then the floor, then anywhere that wasn't the couch. "Ken—we—you—the door code—we brought *sinigang*—"

Justin stood frozen just behind Pablo, his eyes wide and completely captivated by the sheer spectacle. He slowly lowered his iced drink, blinking twice. "Oh. Wow. Hello."

Josh, however, didn't panic. A slow, deeply wicked grin spread across his face as he stepped out from behind Pablo, crossing his arms and leaning against the hallway archway like he had just bought front-row tickets to the best show in town. "Well, well, well," Josh drawled, his tone dripping with sheer delight. "Look who forgot to put the security latch on."

On the couch, the two figures finally paused.

Ken didn't flinch. He didn't scramble for a pillow, and he certainly didn't shove Joaquin off. Slowly, almost lazily, Ken broke the kiss, his dark, heavy-lidded eyes drifting over Joaquin's shoulder toward the four stunned men standing in his entryway. A slow, unbothered smirk curled the corner of Ken's mouth.

Joaquin didn't move an inch either. With total, effortless poise, he simply rested his forearms on Ken's bare shoulders and turned his head, casting a cool, thoroughly amused glance over his shoulder at the peanut gallery. Up close, Joaquin's sharp jawline, confident posture, and magnetic presence made him look entirely in his element.

"You guys have terrible timing," Ken rasped, his deep voice thick with lingering heat, one hand resting possessively on the curve of Joaquin's hip.

"Or immaculate timing, depending on your aesthetic standards," Joaquin added smoothly, his deep baritone cutting cleanly through the stunned silence. He offered the four frozen idols a polite, charming nod. "Good afternoon."

Pablo finally found his voice, though it was an octave higher than his usual speaking tone. "Who—Ken! Put a shirt on! Both of you, put shirts on! Why are neither of you wearing shirts?!"

"It's warm in here," Ken replied deadpan, raising an eyebrow. "And last time I checked, this is my house."

"We have boundaries! We have a schedule!" Pablo sputtered, gesturing frantically between the couch and the door while Stell continued to emit high-pitched, vibrating gasps behind him. "We knocked! Well—we didn't knock, but the group chat—you were supposed to read the group chat!"

"I saw it," Ken said, completely unapologetic. "Ignored it on purpose."

Josh barked out a laugh, thoroughly enjoying Pablo's existential crisis. "I have to admit, Ken, your taste is undeniable. Who's your friend?"

Joaquin let out a low, rich chuckle that seemed to vibrate straight through Ken's chest. "Joaquin," he introduced himself, flashing Josh a brilliant, self-assured smile. "And if you gentlemen need a minute to process, you're more than welcome to take a seat. Or watch. We don't mind an audience."

Stell gasped so violently he sounded like a punctured tire. "Watch?! He said *watch*! Pablo, do something, he is corrupting our main dancer!"

Ken's smirk deepened into something wicked. "You heard him," Ken murmured, his fingers sliding up Joaquin's spine, pulling the man back down toward him. "Take notes if you want."

Without waiting for a response, Ken tilted his chin up, and Joaquin met him halfway, diving right back into a languid, teasing kiss right in front of the four horrified and entertained members—leaving the doorway to descend into absolute, deafening pandemonium.

Chapter 3:Damage Control

The living room exploded into an acoustic nightmare.

"Look away! Justin, avert your youthful, innocent eyes!" Stell shrieked, bodily throwing himself across Justin's field of vision like a Secret Service agent intercepting a projectile. "They're doing it again! In broad daylight! In front of the *sinigang*!"

"Stell, I'm twenty-six," Justin said mildly, gently nudging Stell's flailing elbow out of his face so he could continue watching with serene fascination. "And honestly, the composition is quite cinematic."

"Cinematic?!" Pablo looked ready to combust. He dropped the takeout containers onto the nearest side table with a thud, marching two steps forward before abruptly stopping, his hands hovering awkwardly in the air as if trying to physically erect a modesty wall between the couch and the entryway. "Ken! Susmaryosep, Felip Jhon Suson, have some shame! Put some clothes on right now!"

On the couch, Ken finally let Joaquin's lips slip away, though he didn't put an inch of distance between them. Instead, Ken rested his chin on Joaquin's broad shoulder, casting a dark, heavy-lidded, utterly unbothered glare toward his leader.

"You guys have keys for emergencies," Ken pointed out, his deep voice like rumbling gravel. "This is not an emergency. This is a private residence."

"It *is* an emergency! We have a four-hour vocal block tomorrow morning, and your soul is currently being sucked out through your mouth!" Stell dramatically fan-waved his face with his hand, though his eyes remained glued to the table. "And who authorized this? Who is he? Why is he built like a Greek statue? Why are you *both* glowing?!"

"Good lighting," Joaquin supplied smoothly.

With unhurried grace, Joaquin shifted off Ken's lap, standing to his full height. He stretched slightly, completely immune to the four pairs of eyes tracking the movement, before reaching down to pick up his discarded soft black tee from the floor. He pulled it over his head with practiced ease, shaking out his dark hair before offering the group a relaxed, disarming smile. "Though the company certainly helps."

Ken remained sprawled on the leather sofa, entirely comfortable in his bare skin until Pablo threw a throw pillow straight at his chest. Ken caught it effortlessly against his ribs, rolled his eyes, and finally leaned over to grab an oversized silk short-sleeve button-down, slipping his arms through the sleeves and leaving the front entirely unbuttoned.

"Happy?" Ken drawled, leaning back and resting his arm along the back of the sofa, clearly inviting Joaquin to sit beside him. Joaquin did, settling in so close their shoulders and thighs brushed with familiar warmth.

"Ecstatic," Josh said, strolling straight past a hyperventilating Pablo and dropping into the single leather armchair opposite them. Josh propped his ankle over his opposite knee, resting his chin in his

hand with the triumphant grin of a man who had struck comedic gold. "Now, don't leave out any details. How long has this been going on, who made the first move, and how on earth did Ken manage to land someone who looks like he belongs on the cover of *GQ* without any of us finding out?"

"Josh, please, we need structure," Pablo interjected, pulling up a dining chair, turning it backward, and sitting down with all the gravitas of a high-ranking detective conducting a homicide interrogation. He crossed his arms over the backrest, narrowing his eyes at Ken, then at Joaquin. "I am conducting an official inquiry. Timeline. We need a timeline."

"You're not the police, Pablo," Ken muttered, though a faint, fond smirk twitched at his mouth.

"I am the leader of SB19, which is practically the same thing when you're caught half-naked three weeks before our concert run," Pablo countered, pointing an accusatory finger. "Item one: Name and occupation."

Joaquin chuckled, leaning his elbows on his knees, radiating an easy confidence that seemed to throw Pablo even further off balance. "Joaquin Reyes. I'm an architectural photographer and creative director."

Stell gasped, his hands flying to his cheeks. "Wait. Joaquin Reyes? As in *the* Joaquin Reyes who did the brutalist pavilion shoot in BGC that went viral on Pinterest last year?"

Joaquin raised an amused eyebrow. "That would be me."

"I knew it!" Stell pointed triumphantly at Josh. "I told you that aesthetic was too immaculate to be amateur! Oh my God, your color grading is sublime."

"Stell, focus!" Pablo hissed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We are investigating a security breach, not curating an art gallery."

"I don't think I'm a security breach," Joaquin said mildly, his dark eyes glinting with mischief. "I had a VIP pass when we met."

Justin, who had quietly migrated toward the kitchen counter with his phone in hand, suddenly perked up, tapping his chin. "Wait... the fan event three weeks ago? The guy who asked Ken about the polyrhythms in his solo track instead of asking for an aegyo pose?"

Ken's gaze flicked to Justin, a subtle, possessive warmth entering his expression. "Yeah. That's him."

"I knew that conversation took suspiciously long," Josh laughed, clapping his hands together. "You were standing there looking like you were discussing nuclear physics while the rest of us were doing finger hearts. You sly dog, Ken."

"He had good questions," Ken said simply, reaching out with absolute nonchalance to rest his hand on Joaquin's knee. Joaquin covered Ken's fingers with his own, their knuckles brushing in an easy, grounded rhythm. "And he didn't flinch when I invited him for drinks."

"Drinks that clearly evolved into a gym membership and couch gymnastics," Stell remarked, crossing his arms and pouting, though the theatrical outrage was melting into uncontrollable curiosity. "So... are you an A'TIN? Officially? And most importantly—who was your original bias? Be honest. I can take it, but if it wasn't me, my feelings will be moderately wounded."

Joaquin laughed, a rich, vibrant sound that filled the room. "I appreciate the whole group's discography, Stell. But from day one, it's always been Ken. Nobody moves like him, and nobody writes like him."

Ken didn't say a word, but the subtle flush on his neck and the slight, proud tilt of his chin spoke volumes.

"Gross. The mutual pining is sickening," Josh declared cheerfully. "Pablo, what's our verdict? Are we hazing him or adopting him?"

Pablo sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair. The tension had drained from his shoulders, replaced by the exasperated affection of someone who had long since accepted that his members were uncontrollable forces of nature. "First of all, you're putting the

security latch on your door from now on, Ken. Second... if you're happy, we're happy. But you should have told us. We're your brothers, man."

"I was going to," Ken said, his tone softening slightly, the defensive edge dropping entirely. "We just wanted something that was ours for a little bit first. Before the world starts weighing in."

The living room quieted for a beat. The four members exchanged subtle, understanding glances. They all knew the crushing weight of public scrutiny, the suffocating nature of rumors, and how rare it was to find something genuine under the blinding glare of the spotlight.

"Understood," Pablo nodded, his expression softening into genuine warmth. "Though for the record, next time I come over with *sinigang*, I'm kicking the door open first."

"Duly noted," Joaquin smiled.

For the next hour, the interrogation disintegrated into pure, noisy camaraderie. The plastic containers were cracked open at Ken's dining island, spoons clattering against porcelain as the members devoured the food, firing playful questions at Joaquin about his photography work, teasing Ken relentlessly about how soft he looked whenever Joaquin spoke, and arguing over music playlists. Joaquin held his own effortlessly, trading sharp wit with Josh, complimenting Stell's latest vocal run, and debating stage lighting with Justin.

By the time the four prepared to leave, Josh had already pulled out his phone.

"I'm creating a new group chat," Josh announced proudly. "'Operation Keep Ken Clothed.' Joaquin, drop your number."

"Do not give him your number," Ken warned, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. "He will send you memes at three in the morning."

"Already typing it," Joaquin said, flashing Ken a wicked wink as he

handed his phone to Josh.

"Traitor," Ken muttered, though the corner of his mouth curved upward.

"We have to set up ground rules!" Stell insisted, lingering by the doorway while Pablo practically dragged him into the hall. "Date night itineraries! Disguise protocols! Joaquin, I will personally style you so the paparazzi think you're his bodyguard!"

"Goodnight, Stell," Pablo groaned, hauling the vocalist backward into the elevator while Justin offered a polite wave and Josh blew a dramatic kiss.

"Use protection—I mean, use the deadbolt!" Josh called out just as the elevator doors slid shut, cutting off Stell's parting shout.

Silence fell over the apartment like a heavy, velvet curtain.

Ken let out a long, theatrical breath, resting his head back against the closed front door. "I apologize on behalf of my entire circus."

Joaquin turned from the kitchen island, where he was stacking the empty takeout bowls into the sink. He was barefoot, his t-shirt hanging loosely over his frame, looking impossibly domestic in the dimming amber light of the apartment. "Don't apologize. They're amazing. Intense, chaotic, and loud—but they clearly love you."

"They're nosy," Ken grunted, pushing off the door and walking slowly toward Joaquin.

When Ken reached the kitchen island, he didn't stop at a polite distance. He stepped directly into Joaquin's personal space, planting his hands on the marble counter on either side of Joaquin's hips, effectively caging him in. The playful snark had melted away, replaced by the raw, magnetic intensity that made Ken so captivating.

"You handled them well," Ken murmured, his eyes dark, sweeping over Joaquin's features in the quiet shadows. "Most people would have bolted when Pablo started lecturing."

"I don't scare easily, Felip," Joaquin answered quietly, leaning in until their chests brushed. He lifted one hand, his fingers tracing the sharp, defined line of Ken's jawline, feeling the steady pulse beneath the warm skin. "And I told you—I'm not here for the idol. I'm here for you. The noise doesn't bother me."

Ken's gaze softened, a rare, un-shielded vulnerability flickering across his face. In an industry where everyone wanted a piece of the persona, the stage name, the brand, having someone look straight through the glitter to the man underneath was both terrifying and intoxicating.

"I want to protect this," Ken whispered, his voice dropping into a rough, intimate timber. His hand moved to Joaquin's nape, pulling him closer until their foreheads rested together, breathing the same air. "I don't care if the guys know. But out there... the internet, the fans, the media... they tear things apart."

"Then we keep it ours," Joaquin promised, his thumb brushing Ken's lower lip with tender certainty. "Between these walls. No cameras, no press. Just us."

Ken exhaled a shuddering, relieved breath against Joaquin's mouth. The kiss that followed wasn't fueled by the adrenaline of getting caught; it was deep, slow, and intensely intimate, sealing an unspoken pact of trust. Ken pulled Joaquin flush against him, savoring the solid heat, the quiet rhythm of their breathing, and the profound peace of simply being held.

The peace lasted exactly twelve hours.

The following morning at 7:30 AM, Ken was awakened not by his alarm, but by his phone violently vibrating against the nightstand, rattling with the frantic urgency of a machine gun.

Ken groaned, rolling over on his stomach, his arm still draped over Joaquin's sleeping form. He reached blindly for the device, squinting against the harsh glare of the screen.

There were forty-seven missed calls from Pablo, thirty-two from their head manager, and an avalanche of notifications from the

group chat.

[OPERATION KEEP KEN CLOTHED]

Stell: WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP
Stell: EMERGENCY DEACON 1
Pablo: Ken, call me immediately. Do NOT open Twitter.
Josh: Too late, he's probably going to open Twitter.
Justin: I am so, so sorry. I didn't see it in the background.

Ken's stomach dropped. He sat bolt upright, the sheets pooling around his waist.

Joaquin stirred beside him, blinking awake and propping himself up on one elbow, his voice rough with sleep. "What is it? What happened?"

Without answering, Ken unlocked his phone and opened the trending topics.

Sitting at number one worldwide with over two hundred thousand posts:

#WhoIsWithKen
#KenCondoMystery
#SB19Ken

Ken clicked the top tag with trembling fingers.

The source was an innocent, behind-the-scenes Instagram Story that Justin had posted late the previous evening—a quick ten-second video of Justin showing off the takeout food with Stell dancing dramatically in the kitchen background. It was supposed to be a cute, casual update for the fans.

Except in the polished, floor-to-ceiling glass reflection behind Stell, the apartment's living room was clearly visible.

Reflected in the glass was Ken, lounging shirtless on the sofa, with a tall, broad-shouldered man wearing a bespoke, custom-engraved leather camera harness and a distinctive silver dragon signet ring resting his hand against Ken's bare shoulder.

The A'TIN fandom had dissected the reflection with forensic precision within minutes of the story going live. They had zoomed in, enhanced the lighting, and matched the unique silver signet ring and vintage Leica camera strap directly to the public portfolio page of Joaquin Reyes—a prominent creative director who had recently attended Ken's VIP fan event.

Screenshots were everywhere. Side-by-side comparisons of Joaquin's public Instagram photos and the reflection in Ken's condo were racking up thousands of retweets by the second. The timeline was in a full-blown meltdown of shock, wild theories, and romantic speculation.

"Wait is Ken dating the architectural photographer?!"
"LOOK AT THE WAY HIS HAND IS ON KEN'S SHOULDER IN THE REFLECTION OMG"
"They were both shirtless in Ken's private condo??? What is happening?!"

Ken stared at the screen, the silence in the bedroom suddenly deafening.

Joaquin leaned over Ken's shoulder, his eyes scanning the viral posts, the trending hashtags, and the undeniable photographic evidence lighting up the internet.

The private sanctuary they had promised to protect twelve hours ago had just been blown wide open to the entire world.

Joaquin looked from the phone to Ken's pale, tense face. "Well," Joaquin said, his voice surprisingly calm despite the storm brewing outside their door. "Looks like our privacy just expired. What do you want to do?"

Chapter 4: The official Unofficial Plan

Ken stared down at the glowing screen for a long, heavy second before flipping the phone face down onto the mattress. The sudden silence in the bedroom felt thick, almost fragile, charged with the hum of a hundred thousand strangers currently picking apart their private lives.

He ran a hand over his face, dragging his fingers through his disheveled hair, his broad shoulders tensing as he stared at the wall.

"Felip," Joaquin said softly.

Joaquin didn't pull away. Instead, he shifted closer, resting one warm palm flat against the center of Ken's bare back. His touch was grounding, steady as bedrock beneath Ken's racing thoughts.

"I'm fine," Ken muttered, his voice gravelly. "I'm just... thinking."

"Don't do that alone," Joaquin murmured, his thumb drawing a gentle, reassuring line along Ken's spine. "Look at me."

Ken turned his head, meeting Joaquin's dark, unwavering gaze. There was no panic in Joaquin's eyes—no regret, no sudden urge to scramble for his clothes and run out into the morning light. There was only calm deliberation, paired with that quiet, piercing intelligence that had arrested Ken's attention from the very first moment they spoke.

"Here's where I stand," Joaquin began, his tone measured and clear. "I'm not a child, Felip. I'm a twenty-eight-year-old man who walked into this with my eyes wide open. I knew who you were, and I chose to be here because I wanted *you*. I'm not going to run around demanding you announce us to the universe, but I need to know right now: are you planning on turning me into a secret you're ashamed of?"

"No," Ken answered instantly, the word snapping out with fierce conviction. He turned fully on the mattress, reaching out to cup the back of Joaquin's neck, his fingers tangling into the dark silk of Joaquin's hair. "Never that. I'm not ashamed of you, Joaquin. Not for a single second."

"Then don't treat this like a crime scene," Joaquin said softly, leaning into the warmth of Ken's palm. "If you want to say nothing, we say nothing. If you want to say we're seeing each other, we say it. I will follow your lead when it comes to the media circus because it's your career. But I won't let you treat me like a liability, and I won't let you shoulder the pressure by yourself."

Ken felt a knot loosen in his chest, replaced by an ache of fierce, protective fondness. He leaned in until their foreheads rested against each other, his breath warm against Joaquin's lips.

"You don't know what they're like when they smell blood," Ken whispered, his thumb lightly caressing Joaquin's cheekbone. "The comments, the stalking, the people who think they own every piece of my life... they can be ruthless. I've built armor against it over the years. You haven't had to."

"I don't need armor to know what's real," Joaquin countered, his hand coming up to rest over Ken's heart, feeling the heavy, steady thump against his ribs. "What we have in this room is real. Everything outside that window is just noise. As long as you remember that, they can't touch us."

Ken's chest hitched, a slow, breathtaking smile finally breaking through his stony expression. He closed the tiny sliver of space between them, capturing Joaquin's mouth in a kiss that was neither hurried nor cautious. It was deep, demanding, and full of quiet reverence—a silent vow written in the warmth of their skin and the tangle of their breath.

The moment was shattered by the shrill, violent ringing of Ken's front door buzzer, followed immediately by three frantic, rhythmic thuds.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

"Ken! Open up! We have color-coded folders!" Pablo's voice muffled through the heavy wood from the hallway.

Joaquin pulled back from the kiss, an amused smirk curving his lips. "Sounds like your cavalry has arrived."

Ken groaned, dropping his head onto Joaquin's bare shoulder with an exasperated sigh. "Can we just pretend we've moved to Spain?"

"They have a spare key, remember?" Joaquin chuckled, giving Ken's waist a playful squeeze before slipping out from under the covers. "Come on. Let's go face the war council."

Ten minutes later, the living room had been entirely transformed into a command center.

Pablo was pacing back and forth in front of the kitchen island, clutching a sleek black tablet in one hand and a legal pad covered in neat, terrifyingly structured handwriting in the other.

"Okay, the damage is quantifiable, but manageable," Pablo said without looking up, his voice operating at full leader-cadence. "Justin's story was live for eleven minutes and forty-two seconds before he deleted it. In that time frame, it accumulated eighty-four thousand views, four hundred plus screen recordings, and has migrated across three major social platforms."

"I calculated the refractive index of the double-pane balcony glass," Justin said miserably from the sofa, slumping so low into the cushions he looked like an over-sized hoodie with legs. He was holding an ice pack against his forehead in sheer theatrical guilt. "If the angle of the sun had been three degrees lower, the reflection would have diffused into a harmless glare. I am the architect of our ruin. Ken, you can take my dessert privileges for the entire month of July."

"Keep your desserts, Jah," Ken said dryly. He was leaning against the kitchen counter in fresh sweatpants and a loose grey tank top, drinking black coffee while Joaquin stood beside him, casually leaning against the marble with a cup of tea, looking entirely unfazed.

"Don't let him off so easily, Ken!" Stell declared dramatically, bursting out of the hallway bathroom wearing over-sized sunglasses and holding up Ken's black trench coat like a matador's cape. "We need misdirection! Theatricality! Joaquin, put this on."

Joaquin arched a brow. "Is that a wool trench coat in thirty-two-degree heat?"

"It's not just a coat, it's an *aesthetic disguise*!" Stell insisted, waving his hands with grand flourish. "Here's the pitch: we release a statement claiming Joaquin is actually an avant-garde European contemporary dance consultant hired to choreograph our next

music video. That explains why you were both shirtless—you were practicing contact improvisation!"

"Contact improvisation," Josh repeated from the armchair, swirling an iced americano and watching the spectacle with undisguised glee. "Stell, they were locked in a vertical embrace on a three-seater sofa. If that's contact improvisation, I'm the Pope."

"It's an artistic tradition!" Stell argued.

"It's a disaster," Pablo corrected sharply, slapping his legal pad onto the counter. "No absurd cover stories. We need a clean, airtight strategy. Josh, stop encouraging them. Ken, Joaquin, listen to the options."

Pablo tapped his tablet, clearing his throat.

"Option Alpha: Total Denial. We state that the reflection was an optical distortion and the individual in question is a production lighting technician who was adjusting the apartment's ambient fixtures."

"A lighting technician wearing a custom designer signet ring?" Joaquin asked, tilting his head with a faint smile. "A'TIN found my jewelry maker's Etsy shop within forty minutes of the leak, Pablo. They know the ring is sterling silver from Florence."

Josh snorted into his coffee. "He's got you there, Pinuno."

Pablo pinched the bridge of his nose, his eye twitching slightly. "Fine. Option Beta: The 'Strictly Professional' Pivot. We announce that Joaquin was commissioned for an exclusive, highly private architectural photo series of Ken's living space for an upcoming art book, and the casual attire was due to extreme studio heat."

"At night?" Ken drawled, taking a slow sip of his coffee. "In an air-conditioned condominium?"

"Felip, work with me here!" Pablo threw his hands up. "What's your brilliant alternative? Option Gamma: Josh's suggestion, which is just posting a high-res photo of the two of you holding hands with the caption 'Cry about it'?"

"I still vote for Option Gamma," Josh chimed in cheerfully. "Think of the engagement metrics. The servers would melt."

"Justin is already having a panic attack, Josh, do not break the internet further," Stell scowled, sitting down beside Justin and patting the younger man's shoulder soothingly. "There, there, Jah. The glare was indeed very bright."

"We need to rehearse," Pablo commanded, ignoring the chaos and stepping directly in front of Ken and Joaquin. He held his pen up like a microphone. "Let's run a mock press interview right now. Ken, you are facing a panel of fifty entertainment journalists. Joaquin, you are standing off-camera. Ready? Action."

Pablo cleared his throat, adopting a high-pitched, sensationalist reporter voice: *"Ken! Regarding the viral reflection from yesterday evening—can you clarify the nature of your relationship with creative director Joaquin Reyes?"*

Ken didn't blink. He casually set his coffee mug down, turned his head, and looked Joaquin up and down with slow, unapologetic appreciation.

"I'd tell them," Ken said smoothly, his deep baritone dropping into a teasing purr, "that Joaquin takes exceptional photos, has impeccable bone structure, and gives remarkably good neck massages."

Joaquin chuckled, meeting Ken's gaze with equal heat. "And I'd tell them Ken has terrible posture when he writes lyrics, but his rhythm more than makes up for it."

Ken smirked, reaching out with absolute ease to catch Joaquin by the belt loop of his jeans, tugging him an inch closer. "You like the rhythm, huh?"

"Ken! Joaquin! Stop flirting during the mock press conference!" Pablo yelled, throwing his pen onto the sofa cushions in utter defeat. "This is a serious crisis simulation!"

"I don't know, Pablo," Josh remarked, leaning forward with a broad grin. "I think the chemistry is very marketable. We could sell tickets

to this."

"I am resigning as leader," Pablo announced flatly, burying his face in his hands. "I am retiring to the mountains to raise goats."

The laughter that rippled through the room gradually eased the frantic morning energy, transforming the room from a war room back into a shared home.

Justin finally sat up, offering a small, sheepish smile as Joaquin brought him a glass of water, while Stell abandoned his trench coat in favor of raiding Ken's refrigerator for leftover mangoes.

While the others argued good-naturally over breakfast options, Ken caught Joaquin's sleeve, subtly guiding him toward the quiet alcove by the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city.

The morning sun cast a bright, clean glare across the glass—the very same glass that had started the firestorm hours earlier.

"You okay?" Ken asked, keeping his voice low so only Joaquin could hear. The playful bravado from the mock rehearsal had softened into genuine concern.

"I'm better than okay," Joaquin answered softly, turning to face him. He looked at Ken with an openness that made the noise of the world feel completely irrelevant. "Watching you deal with them... seeing how much they care about you, and how easily you stand your ground... it's amazing, Ken."

"I meant what I said earlier," Ken murmured, his hands resting comfortably at his sides, though his eyes never left Joaquin's face. "No lies. I don't want to release some sterile, corporate statement saying you're just a 'technician' or a 'colleague.' It feels cheap. It disrespects what this is."

"And what is this?" Joaquin asked, a tender, challenging glimmer in his eyes.

Ken's gaze softened, the fierce intensity in his expression settling into something profound. "It's real. It's mine. And it's yours. We don't owe the public an itemized breakdown of our private life, but

I'm not going to lie and say you don't matter to me."

Joaquin smiled, reaching out to gently squeeze Ken's forearm. "Then here are our ground rules. Simple and clean. No fake PR stories. No using our personal life to drum up hype. And no giving up our peace just to satisfy people's curiosity. When they ask—and they will—you tell them your personal life is private, but you have nothing to hide and nothing to apologize for."

"A dignified 'none of your business,'" Ken nodded with a faint smirk. "I can do that."

"Good," Joaquin said, leaning in just enough to brush his shoulder against Ken's. "Because whatever happens out there, we handle it together."

Before Ken could answer, his phone chimed sharply from the counter behind them. At the exact same second, the chime of Joaquin's phone echoed from the dining table.

The room went instantly quiet.

Pablo walked over to Ken's phone, glancing at the preview screen. His expression shifted from exasperated humor to strict, professional seriousness.

"It's management," Pablo said, looking up at Ken. "They just finalized tomorrow's schedule. The live broadcast on *Showbiz Prime* was moved up to tomorrow morning at 9:00 AM. It's a live studio panel. They're giving you a dedicated solo segment, Ken. They *will* ask about the photos."

Ken's jaw set into a firm, resolute line. "Let them ask."

Across the room, Joaquin picked up his own phone, unlocking the screen to read a fresh notification that had just landed in his inbox. His brow furrowed in surprise as his eyes scanned the formal letterhead.

"Joaquin?" Stell asked, noticing the shift in the photographer's posture. "What is it? Did someone leak your number?"

"No," Joaquin murmured, his eyes flicking from the screen toward Ken with an unreadable expression. "It's an official request from the network producing *Showbiz Prime*. They're revamping their studio visual campaign for the new quarter... and they just offered me the contract to be the head creative director and lead on-set photographer for tomorrow's live broadcast."

The members froze, looking between Joaquin and Ken in stunned silence.

Ken stared at Joaquin, a slow, dangerous spark of amusement and anticipation igniting in his dark eyes.

"Well," Ken murmured, the corner of his lips curling into a wicked, confident grin. "Looks like you're going to have the best seat in the house."

Chapter 5: Live Under the Lights

The backstage green room of Studio 4 at *Showbiz Prime* smelled faintly of aerosol hairspray, lukewarm catered brewed coffee, and Pablo's unadulterated existential dread.

It was 8:15 AM. The live broadcast went to air in forty-five minutes.

"Posture, Felip. Chin up three degrees. Do not do that menacing side-eye you do when you want to ignore soundcheck notes," Pablo instructed, pacing in front of Ken with a stack of neon-yellow index cards. "If Rhea Gomez asks about the reflection, you do not say 'No comment'—that sounds guilty. You do not say 'Ask Justin'—that throws our *maknae* under the bus. And you absolutely under no circumstances say 'He looks even better without the glass between us.'"

"I wasn't going to say that," Ken drawled from the makeup chair, keeping his head perfectly still as the stylist touched up the matte foundation across his sharp cheekbones. He was dressed in a tailored, collarless charcoal suit jacket over a crisp, unbuttoned silk shirt that showed just enough of his collarbone to make the studio's wardrobe intern drop a clipboard twice. "Though it's factually accurate."

"Felip Jhon!" Pablo hissed, slapping the cards against his own palm. "I haven't slept since Tuesday!"

"Pablo, chill out, you're raising his cortisol," Josh said from the leather sofa. He was lazily spinning a fidget spinner on the knee of his ripped jeans, looking utterly relaxed. "Ken's great under pressure. Remember when his microphone died in Dubai and he just hit the high note acoustic like an absolute menace? He's got this. Besides, if all else fails, he can just hit them with the signature Felip smirk and let Twitter handle the discourse."

"That is terrible advice!" Stell cried, bursting out from behind the dressing curtain where he had been aggressively practicing vocal warm-ups. He lunged forward, grabbing Ken's shoulders from behind the chair and staring at Ken's reflection in the vanity mirror with terrifying intensity. "Ken. Look at me. When the spotlight hits your eyes, you must channel serene, untroubled elegance. Like a swan gliding across a calm lake, oblivious to the frogs croaking in the mud."

"Are the journalists the frogs in this metaphor?" Justin asked from the corner, where he sat neatly wrapped in an oversized fleece blanket, quietly eating a cup of strawberry yogurt. "Or am I the frog because of the Instagram story?"

"Justin, you are a precious swan-in-training, eat your yogurt," Stell snapped affectionately before turning back to Ken. "Now, practice your innocent smile. The one that says, *'I am simply an innocent musical artist who knows nothing of earthly pleasures.'*"

Ken stared deadpan into the mirror, arching a single dark eyebrow. "I don't think anyone on earth believes I know nothing of earthly pleasures, Stell."

"He's right," Josh agreed cheerfully. "The man wrote *Bulan* and *Crimzone*. The innocent ship sailed five years ago."

Justin swallowed a spoonful of yogurt and raised his hand timidly. "What if... what if during the interview, I run across the background wearing a giant inflatable dinosaur costume? To create a distraction?"

Pablo pinched his nose, groaning into his index cards. "Why am I the only adult in this company?"

Before Stell could argue that the dinosaur gambit had artistic merit, the dressing room door clicked open.

The room fell into an immediate, synchronized hush.

Joaquin walked in holding a heavy black camera rig across his shoulder and a production tablet tucked under his arm. He wore a crisp, tailored black long-sleeve, sleeves rolled precisely to his forearms, dark trousers, and a laminate badge hanging from his neck that read: *CREATIVE DIRECTOR / VISUAL LEAD - GUEST PROD.*

He looked completely, effortlessly in his element. There was an easy, commanding confidence to the way he carried himself—the kind of professional magnetism that made people instinctively step aside in crowded corridors.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Joaquin said, his deep, smooth voice cutting through the manic energy of the room like a cool breeze.

"Joaquin!" Stell gasped, instantly letting go of Ken's shoulders and smoothing his own hair. "You look so... official! Look at the badge! He has higher clearance than our tour manager!"

"The network takes visual revamps very seriously," Joaquin replied with an easy smile, nodding politely to Pablo. "Morning, Pablo. The studio crew is setting your group mark for the opening intro. You're on Camera 1 and 3."

Pablo exhaled a massive, shuddering breath of relief. "An actual professional. Thank God. Are the lighting rigs set for the solo segment?"

"Already adjusted," Joaquin said, tapping his tablet. "I dialed back the harsh key lights. The contrast was washing out Ken's jawline on the monitor tests. We're using a softer, cinematic tungsten fill from the left. It'll give depth without making him look like he's under police interrogation."

Ken watched Joaquin in the mirror, his dark eyes darkening with an unmistakable spark of pride.

"I need two minutes with the talent to check framing," Joaquin added smoothly, his gaze catching Ken's in the glass. "Standard pre-show composition check."

"Take five!" Pablo said immediately, herding the rest of the members toward the door. "Come on, boys, let's go do soundcheck on the stage mics. Justin, leave the dinosaur suit in the van."

"It was just a contingency plan!" Justin protested as Stell hauled him out by his hoodie.

Josh lingered at the door for a fraction of a second, shooting Ken a knowing, wicked grin before clicking the door shut behind them.

The sudden quiet in the green room was intoxicating.

Joaquin didn't move right away. He stood by the closed door, letting the silence settle between them until the hum of the fluorescent fixtures seemed to fade into nothing. Then, slowly, he set his camera and tablet onto the side table and walked over to the vanity chair.

Ken didn't turn around; he just tracked Joaquin's reflection as the older man stopped directly behind him, resting his hands lightly on the padded leather back of the chair.

"Tungsten fill from the left, huh?" Ken murmured, his baritone dropping to that low, private register meant exclusively for Joaquin.

"You look stunning in warm light," Joaquin answered softly, his eyes raking over Ken's styled hair, the sharp cut of his suit, and the sliver of golden skin exposed at his throat. "Though you look pretty incredible in harsh white morning light, too."

Ken let out a quiet chuckle, turning his chair around until he was seated between Joaquin's thighs. He reached out with effortless familiarity, his warm fingers finding the hem of Joaquin's black shirt, curling into the fabric just enough to anchor him close.

"They're gonna throw fire at me out there," Ken said, tilting his head up to meet Joaquin's steady gaze. There was no fear in his eyes, but a flicker of electric adrenaline buzzed beneath his calm exterior. "Pablo was having heart palpitations about it."

"Pablo cares about you," Joaquin said, reaching down to gently brush a stray strand of dark hair away from Ken's forehead. His fingers lingered for a second against Ken's temple, warm and grounding. "And for the record... they can throw whatever they want. You know who you are."

"Do you?" Ken challenged quietly, his thumb tracing the sharp contour of Joaquin's hip through the dark fabric. "Because when I sit in that chair, I'm not playing their game. I'm not giving them an apology for something that gave me peace."

Joaquin leaned in, placing one hand on the armrest beside Ken's hip, bringing their faces so close Ken could feel the steady warmth of his breath.

"I don't want an apology," Joaquin whispered, his dark eyes burning with fierce, unapologetic devotion. "I want you to walk out there and be untouchable. I'll be right behind Camera 2, framing every single shot. When you look into that lens, you're looking at me. Deal?"

Ken's lips curved into a slow, breathtaking smirk. He tugged Joaquin's shirt, pulling him down that final inch until their lips brushed—a brief, searing contact that tasted of black coffee and raw anticipation.

"Deal," Ken murmured against his mouth.

A sharp knock on the dressing room door broke the spell.

"Two minutes to air, Mr. Suson! Standby on the floor!"

Joaquin straightened up with effortless composure, smoothing his shirt and picking up his camera in one fluid motion. He offered Ken a crisp, professional nod that had a devastating glint of mischief behind it.

"After you, Mr. Suson."

The studio floor was a whirlwind of controlled chaos. Floor managers barked time cues through headsets, robotic crane cameras swept overhead, and the live studio audience hummed with nervous anticipation.

Pablo, Stell, Josh, and Justin had already finished their cheerful, polished group greeting at the main interview desk and had migrated to the VIP viewing area just off-stage. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, watching nervously as the floor manager directed Ken into a deep crimson armchair under the studio spotlights.

Across the studio floor, standing directly behind the primary pedestal camera, Joaquin raised his viewfinder to his eye. Through the high-definition monitor, Ken looked commanding—dark, poised, and utterly magnetic.

"And we're back in five, four, three..."

The red tally light atop Camera 2 flickered to life.

"Welcome back to *Showbiz Prime*," began Rhea Gomez, a veteran entertainment host known throughout the country for her charming smile and lethal, velvet-wrapped interview questions. She sat across from Ken, radiating polished network authority. "I'm sitting here with SB19's main dancer and lead rapper, the multi-talented Felip Jhon Suson—better known to millions of adoring fans across the globe simply as Ken."

Ken inclined his head slightly, offering a calm, courteous nod. "Good morning, Miss Rhea. Happy to be here."

"Now, Ken, it has been a monumental year for you," Rhea said, leaning forward on the glass desk. "Solo releases, international chart records, sold-out arena runs. But over the last forty-eight hours, the internet hasn't just been talking about your music."

Off-stage, Stell clutched Justin's arm so hard the younger man winced. Pablo began silently tapping his thigh in four-four time to

keep his breathing steady.

On the massive digital wall behind the desk, a high-resolution screenshot appeared. It was the viral image from Justin's deleted story—the sharp, unmistakable reflection in the balcony glass showing Ken shirtless, locked in an intimate embrace with another man whose distinctive silver signet ring was clearly visible.

A collective, sharp intake of breath echoed through the studio audience.

Rhea turned her sharp gaze back to Ken. "Within minutes of this image surfacing, social media erupted. Fan theories, trending topics, speculations about who was in your private residence late that night. Some commentators have called it a scandal; others are asking if SB19's management should issue a clarification regarding your conduct."

Rhea paused, letting the silence hang heavily in the air before delivering the strike.

"So, Ken... for the millions of viewers watching live right now: can you clarify who that man in your condo was, what exactly we're looking at, and whether you owe your fans an explanation?"

The studio fell dead silent. Even the camera operators seemed to freeze, waiting for the defensive stammer, the rehearsed PR dodge, or the awkward evasion.

Behind the lens of Camera 2, Joaquin kept his focus locked entirely on Ken's face.

Ken didn't flinch. He didn't look at the screen behind him. He didn't shift in his chair. He casually rested his forearms on his knees, leaning slightly forward, his deep, rumbling baritone filling the studio with utter, unshakable authority.

"Miss Rhea," Ken began smoothly, his gaze locking directly down the barrel of Camera 2—straight into Joaquin's lens. "First, I think we should be very clear about what a scandal actually is. A scandal is when an artist hurts someone, breaks the law, or betrays the trust

of the people who support them."

He paused, a quiet, devastatingly confident smile playing at the edge of his lips.

"Enjoying a private, consenting connection in the quiet of my own home with someone exceptional is not a scandal. It's called being a human being."

A low murmur rippled through the studio crew. In the wings, Josh broke into a wide, triumphant grin, while Pablo let out a long, shuddering exhale.

"As for an explanation," Ken continued, his voice steady and resolute, "I have spent years giving my energy, my voice, my body, and my music to our fans. Every time I step on a stage, I give one hundred percent of who I am. But my private life is not a product for public consumption, and it is not up for public audition."

He held Rhea's gaze, entirely unapologetic.

"The person in that reflection is someone who deserves respect, not sensationalized headlines. I have nothing to hide, Miss Rhea. And I have absolutely nothing to apologize for."

For three long seconds, Rhea Gomez simply stared at him, caught off guard by the sheer, unyielding dignity of the answer. Then, slowly, a look of genuine professional respect flashed across her face.

"A clear line drawn by Felip himself," Rhea said smoothly, turning back to the camera with a practiced nod. "Music, passion, and boundaries that command respect. When we return, we'll take a look at the upcoming visual campaign for SB19's new project... right after this."

"Clear on commercial!" the floor director shouted. "Audio mute, lighting standby!"

The instant the red light died, the atmosphere in the studio snapped.

"Holy shit," Stell breathed backstage, practically collapsing against Justin. "He didn't just dodge the bullet, he caught it with his teeth and turned it into an aesthetic."

"Did you hear that phrasing?" Josh laughed, clapping Pablo violently on the shoulder. "'Someone exceptional.' Pinuno, your color-coded folders are officially obsolete. He just owned the whole narrative."

Pablo sat down on an equipment case, rubbing his temples, though a faint, proud smile tugged at his mouth. "He didn't deny it. He didn't confirm an identity. He established a boundary. It was... surprisingly brilliant."

Out on the studio floor, Ken un-clipped his lavalier microphone and stood up. He walked past the bustling stagehands and stepped straight toward Camera 2.

Joaquin lowered his camera rig, standing tall beside the tripod. His face was composed, the consummate professional in front of the surrounding crew, but his dark eyes were burning with an intensity that sent a jolt of pure heat straight through Ken's veins.

"How was the framing?" Ken asked quietly, stopping just inches away from Joaquin.

"Flawless," Joaquin replied, his voice dropping into that low, intimate register that made the crowded room vanish. "The light hit you perfectly."

"Told you," Ken smirked, his eyes flicking over Joaquin's mouth. "I don't miss."

"You really don't," Joaquin murmured, his fingers brushing against Ken's wrist for a brief, electric fraction of a second beneath the shadow of the camera rig.

Before either of them could say another word, the sharp clicking of high heels echoed rapidly across the studio floor.

A woman in a sharp lavender blazer—the network's Senior Vice President of Creative Programming—strode briskly toward them,

clutching a glowing tablet and flanked by two frantic associate producers.

"Felip. Joaquin. A word," the executive commanded, stopping directly between them.

Ken immediately straightened, his protective instincts flaring as he stepped half an inch closer to Joaquin. "If there's an issue with the segment—"

"An issue?" the executive interrupted, turning her tablet screen toward them with wide, manic eyes. "In the ninety seconds since you gave that answer, our digital stream spiked by two point four million viewers. The hashtag #NothingToApologizeFor is currently number one worldwide. And our audience engagement metrics just broke the network's quarterly server record."

Ken and Joaquin exchanged a quick, guarded glance.

"That's great for the network," Ken said evenly. "We're glad the numbers are good."

"It's not just good, it's unprecedented," the executive said, her eyes darting sharply between Ken's guarded posture and Joaquin's unwavering calm. A shrewd, calculating smile spread across her face. "Our technical credits aired your name during the bumper, Joaquin. A'TIN already matched your portfolio and that sterling silver signet ring on your hand to the production roster. They know our new creative director is the man from the reflection."

Pablo and Stell arrived at the edge of the circle, freezing in their tracks.

"Ma'am," Pablo began diplomatically, stepping forward. "Our official stance is that personal matters—"

"Save it, Pablo," the executive waved a hand, her gaze locked entirely on Ken and Joaquin. "The network just authorized a primetime, sixty-minute visual special for the upcoming album rollout. High-fashion, behind-the-scenes, fully unscripted."

She paused, tapping a long acrylic nail against the edge of her

tablet.

"And management's only condition for the green light is that Joaquin co-hosts the broadcast on-camera, right next to Ken."

Chapter 6: The Public Experiment

The silence that settled over Studio 4 after the network executive's ultimatum was heavy enough to register on a seismograph.

Pablo was the first to react, his reflexes firing with the honed efficiency of a seasoned leader navigating a sudden public relations ambush. He physically stepped between the executive and the two men, his leather portfolio clutched against his chest like a tactical shield.

"Ma'am, with all due respect, an unscripted primetime special is a massive logistical undertaking," Pablo said smoothly, his voice dropping into his polished, impeccably polite negotiation register. "Any co-hosting arrangement involving external creative staff requires extensive contract review, talent scheduling, and formal clearance from 1Z Entertainment."

"You have twenty-four hours to clear it," the executive replied, unfazed by Pablo's corporate barrier. She handed a glossy production folder directly across Pablo's shoulder toward Joaquin. "The buzz from Ken's interview just broke the network's ten-year engagement record. The public doesn't want a generic press junket anymore. They want authenticity. If you deliver, we give SB19 the entire two-hour season premiere slot with zero commercial interruptions during the visual showcase."

She turned on her heel and strode down the corridor, her entourage parting before her like the Red Sea.

The hallway remained dead silent until the heavy double doors clicked shut.

Josh let out a low whistle. "A two-hour uninterrupted album special? Do you have any idea how many streaming records we'd smash with that?"

"Josh, focus," Pablo snapped, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We are not throwing Joaquin into the lion's den just for prime broadcasting real estate."

"I can handle myself, Pablo," Joaquin said calmly. He closed the production folder with a crisp snap, looking down at Ken. "The real question is what Ken wants to do."

Ken hadn't moved an inch from Joaquin's side. His jaw was set, his dark eyes sharp and contemplative. He reached out, his fingers lightly brushing against the sleeve of Joaquin's tailored jacket, a grounding, deliberate touch.

"We don't do fake PR," Ken said, his deep baritone cutting through the lingering tension. "If they want us on camera together, it's not going to be some scripted, manufactured circus where they feed us questions to bait the internet. We talk about the music. We talk about the visual direction. And we set the boundaries."

He looked directly into Joaquin's eyes, searching his expression. "Only if you want this. If you don't want the spotlight, I'll tell management to scrap the deal right now. I don't care about the two-hour slot."

A slow, confident smile touched the corners of Joaquin's mouth. "Ken, I spent four years directing high-stress international shoots and handling prema-dona gallery curators. A few studio cameras won't shake me. If we're doing this, we do it our way—completely on our own terms."

"Then we establish ground rules," Pablo declared, whipping out a sleek digital tablet and a stylus with terrifying speed. "Operation: Controlled Chaos is officially in effect. Nobody signs anything until I color-code this entire contract."

By nine o'clock the following evening, Ken's expansive living room had been converted into what could only be described as an acoustic war room.

Pablo sat cross-legged on the floor surrounded by three different highlighters and an exhaustive spreadsheet labeled *Contingency*

Matrix: Project Co-Host.

"Section 4, Clause B," Pablo announced, pointing a yellow marker at Joaquin. "You are strictly designated as the Lead Creative Director and Guest Visual Host. If the teleprompter tries to slip in any romantic insinuations or cheesy scripted banter, you have full authority to ignore it."

"Agreed," Joaquin said from the kitchen counter, where he was calmly pouring ice into glasses of cold brew. "I'm an architectural photographer, not an actor in a daytime soap."

"Exactly," Stell chimed in, dramatically leaping over the back of the sofa with an empty plastic water bottle gripped like a television microphone. "Which is why we need to rehearse high-pressure media simulations! Joaquin, pretend I'm a gossip columnist with zero boundaries and a budget for fake eyelashes. Go!"

Stell thrust the water bottle inches from Joaquin's nose, adopting an absurdly exaggerated, breathless broadcaster voice. "*Joaquin! Rumor has it that during the album photoshoot, Ken asked for three extra lighting resets just so he could watch you adjust the focal lens! How do you plead to charges of mutual workplace distraction?!*"

Joaquin didn't flinch. He took a sip of his coffee, leveled an unimpressed, effortlessly charming look at Stell, and said, "I plead guilty to having superior lighting standards. Next question."

Josh threw his hands up in defeat. "He's too smooth, Stell. You can't rattle him. The man has ice in his veins."

"No, no, we need to test Ken!" Justin piped up from the dining table, where he was adjusting three different warm-toned desk lamps to simulate studio lighting. He turned a bright LED directly onto Ken's face. "Ken, tilt your chin thirty degrees to the left. You're giving 'brooding rockstar' when you should be giving 'collaborative visionary.' And stop looking at Joaquin's hands every time he picks up a glass. The studio monitors have 4K resolution; people will notice your pupils dilating."

Ken rolled his eyes, snatching a plush decorative pillow from the

couch and hurling it directly into Justin's face with pinpoint accuracy. "Justin, I will lock you on the balcony."

"I am merely providing artistic direction!" Justin protested, catching the pillow and hugging it to his chest with a grin. "If you two look at each other during the live broadcast the way you looked at each other on this couch last week, the broadcast standards board will fine the network for broadcasting pure heat before nine o'clock."

"They wouldn't fine us," Ken retorted smoothly, leaning back into the sofa cushions with his characteristic lazy grace. "They'd thank us for the ratings."

"See?!" Stell squeaked, pointing his water bottle at Ken. "The audacity! He has no fear! Pablo, write that down in the spreadsheet: *Ken's arrogance requires mandatory suppression.*"

Pablo didn't even look up from his tablet. "Already highlighted in red, Stell."

Joaquin chuckled softly, walking over to hand Ken a glass of iced coffee. Their fingers brushed as Ken took the glass, a slow, electric point of contact that neither of them rushed to break.

"Don't worry, boys," Joaquin said, his gaze lingering on Ken's face before sweeping across the room with warm amusement. "We won't let the network exploit anything. We have nothing to hide, and we certainly have nothing to apologize for."

The morning of the live primetime special, Studio 1 at Showbiz Prime was a hive of high-stakes production.

The stage design Joaquin had drafted was breathtaking: a minimalist, industrial-chic gallery space featuring exposed steel beams, dramatic warm backlighting, and towering high-definition projection screens displaying high-fashion concept photography from the new album. It was refined, mature, and strikingly modern—a massive departure from standard television sets.

Backstage, however, the network's floor director was already attempting to push boundaries.

"Okay, look," the director said, waving a laminated cue sheet between Ken and Joaquin in the styling bay. "For the opening segment, when the camera pans from the stage to the lounge area, we want Joaquin already standing behind Ken, leaning over his shoulder to adjust his jacket lapel. Give the audience that intimate, behind-the-scenes visual flavor."

Joaquin looked down at the director, his expression cool and immovable. "No."

The director blinked, taken aback. "Excuse me?"

"I'm the creative director of this showcase, not Ken's stylist," Joaquin said evenly, his baritone steady and authoritative. "The visual narrative is about artistic partnership and the evolution of the sound. If you stage a cheesy, manufactured romance trope, you cheapen the work and insult the audience. We open seated together at the control deck, discussing the track arrangements. As planned."

The director looked frantically toward Ken for support. "Ken, surely you want a dramatic opening visual—"

"Listen to the director," Ken interrupted smoothly, crossing his arms over his chest. His posture was relaxed, but his gaze was razor-sharp. "Joaquin built this concept. If you try to turn our broadcast into a cheap melodrama, we walk out the side door right now."

The director swallowed hard, checked his watch, and quickly scrambled backward. "Right. Control deck it is. Two minutes to technical checks!"

As the crew cleared the immediate area, Ken stepped closer to Joaquin, leaning against the edge of a heavy equipment flight case. "You handle network executives better than our management does."

"I don't like people trying to script what isn't theirs," Joaquin replied quietly.

Despite his composed demeanor, Ken noticed the slight tension in Joaquin's shoulders—the subtle way his thumb grazed the silver signet ring on his finger.

Ken stepped into his space, dropping his voice so only Joaquin could hear. "Hey. Look at me."

Joaquin looked up, meeting Ken's dark, steady gaze.

"You okay?" Ken asked softly. The bravado and onstage persona vanished entirely, replaced by the raw, unguarded sincerity that Joaquin had come to know behind closed doors. "You don't have to carry the whole weight of this room."

Joaquin let out a quiet breath, a faint, self-deprecating smile touching his lips. "I'm used to being behind the lens, Ken. Behind the camera, I'm in control. I choose what the world sees, what gets framed, what stays in the shadows. Out there... under sixty thousand watts of stage lights, with millions watching... there's no framing. It's just us."

He paused, his voice dropping lower. "I'm not ashamed of how I feel about you. Not for a single second. But once this airs, I become 'the guy with Ken Suson.' There's no going back to quiet coffee runs or walking down the street unnoticed."

Ken reached out, not caring that production assistants were scurrying through the far corridors. He wrapped his hand firmly around Joaquin's wrist, feeling the steady, rapid pulse beneath his warm skin.

"I can't promise the outside world won't be loud," Ken said, his voice deep, grounded, and fiercely protective. "People will talk. They'll write articles, they'll dissect every word we say, and some of them will be bitter. I can't control them. But I can control this."

Ken slid his hand down, lacing their fingers together and squeezing tightly.

"You aren't a footnote, Joaquin. You're the one who matches me step for step. We walk out there together, we do the work, and we go home together. As long as you're beside me, let the whole world talk."

Joaquin stared at Ken for a long moment, the quiet vulnerability in

his expression melting into a deep, unshakable warmth. He tightened his grip on Ken's hand, a slow, breathtaking smirk returning to his face. "You're dangerously persuasive when you're being earnest, Suson."

"I'm always earnest with you," Ken whispered, his lips curving into that devastating half-smile. "Now let's go show them how it's done."

From the wings of the main studio, the other four members of SB19 watched through the monitor feed as the red tally lights flared to life across the studio floor.

"Look at them," Stell whispered, clutching Pablo's arm with both hands and resting his chin on Pablo's shoulder. "They look like two monarchs overseeing an empire. Pablo, why do they have more presence than a royal wedding?"

"Because they aren't pretending," Pablo replied softly, crossing his arms with a look of profound, exhausted pride. "For once, Ken isn't fighting the cameras. He's completely in his element."

"Ten pesos says Josh cries before the broadcast ends," Justin whispered, nudging Josh with his elbow.

"I don't cry over Ken being romantic," Josh scoffed, adjusting his jacket while surreptitiously checking his own hair in the monitor reflection. "I'm just emotionally overwhelmed by the fact that Ken finally found someone who can make him show up to a studio ten minutes early."

On the central stage, the opening chords of an unreleased, moody synth track filled the acoustic space. The camera swept across the immaculate visual set, tracking past towering architectural prints before settling into a fluid, two-shot frame of Ken and Joaquin seated at the sleek obsidian control desk.

Ken wore a structured, dark burgundy velvet blazer with a relaxed open collar; Joaquin looked effortlessly commanding in a sharply tailored charcoal suit with rolled cuffs, exuding quiet authority.

"Good evening," Ken began, his low, magnetic baritone echoing

through the studio speakers and instantly commanding the attention of the millions watching live across the country. "Welcome to the visual universe of our upcoming era. Tonight, we aren't just giving you a preview of the music. We're showing you the foundation."

He turned his head, his gaze settling entirely on Joaquin with an openness that had never once appeared in his previous television appearances.

"To build something real, you need a vision that isn't afraid of the dark. And nobody understands that better than our creative director, Joaquin Reyes."

Joaquin met the camera with a calm, magnetic smile, before turning to Ken. The air between them crackled with an effortless, undeniable rhythm—sharp, intellectual, and simmering with an authentic intimacy that no script could ever hope to manufacture.

"Music is architecture in motion," Joaquin said smoothly, his deep voice carrying a natural broadcast warmth. "When Ken and I began designing the visual themes for this album, we agreed on one fundamental rule: no facades. Every shadow, every frame, and every lyric had to reflect absolute truth."

For the next forty minutes, the broadcast was a masterclass in creative synergy. They analyzed choreography footage, debated color palettes with sharp, playful wit, and broke down production techniques. Every time their perspectives clashed, the banter was quick and electric; every time they agreed, the subtle alignment of their movements spoke volumes. Ken's posture was relaxed in a way the public had never witnessed—unhurried, genuinely engaged, and radiating supreme confidence.

Near the conclusion of the broadcast, the veteran studio host seated in the adjacent lounge area took the floor mic for the final segment.

"It has been a truly extraordinary showcase," the host said, leaning forward with a warm, probing smile. "Ken, A'TIN and viewers worldwide have commented on how uniquely aligned you two seem. There's a rare chemistry here—a profound mutual

understanding that goes beyond typical artistic collaboration. How would you define the space you two occupy together?"

Backstage, Pablo straightened up, his hand instantly hovering over his tablet.

On set, Ken didn't hesitate. He didn't look toward the teleprompter, and he didn't check for management's approval.

He simply looked across the small distance separating their chairs. Slowly, deliberately, Ken reached out and placed his hand over Joaquin's where it rested on the armrest, his fingers settling over Joaquin's signet ring in full view of the main 4K broadcast camera.

"Artistic collaboration requires trust," Ken said, his voice unwavering, rich with quiet certainty. "And trust isn't something you hand out lightly. Joaquin is the eye behind our vision, but more than that—he is the standard I hold everything against. We don't hide who we are, and we don't apologize for who stands beside us."

Joaquin turned his hand, curling his fingers warmly through Ken's, their joined hands resting open and claimed under the brilliant studio lights.

"We create together," Joaquin added softly, his eyes locked with Ken's. "And we stand together. That's all that matters."

"And that," the host said, visibly stunned into genuine admiration, "is the absolute truth. Thank you for joining us for Showbiz Prime's album preview special. Goodnight."

The red lights blinked off. The technical monitors faded to black.

Instant pandemonium erupted backstage. Production staff cheered, the floor crew applauded, and Stell practically sprinted across the cables toward the stage.

"You did it!" Stell yelled, throwing his arms dramatically into the air. "It was gorgeous! It was tasteful! It was the most dignified power move in the history of Philippine television!"

Pablo walked onto the set, shaking his head with a wide, relieved

smile. "The network server just logged a ninety-eight percent positive engagement metric. Management is already drafting the official press release endorsing the collaboration."

Ken stood up, releasing Joaquin's hand only to slide an arm securely around his waist, pulling him in close against his side. "Told you. Nothing to worry about."

Joaquin laughed, resting a hand on Ken's shoulder, looking genuinely happy. "I suppose you were right."

Before anyone could celebrate further, the heavy metal door to the studio control room burst open.

Josh stepped out from the backstage corridor, his face completely drained of color. He was holding his phone in a trembling grip, his eyes wide as he looked directly at Pablo and Ken.

"Pablo," Josh said, his voice tight and breathless. "We have a massive problem."

Pablo's smile vanished instantly. "What happened? Did the network pull the streaming replay?"

"No," Josh swallowed hard, turning his phone screen toward them. "Someone from the network's technical crew had a live camera running in the private VIP mezzanine an hour before the broadcast started."

Ken's grip on Joaquin's waist tightened instantly. "What are you talking about?"

"A five-minute unedited, high-definition video just leaked on Twitter and TikTok," Josh said grimly. "It's the corridor behind the green room. It's Ken pinning Joaquin against the technical bay lockers, kissing him out of his mind before we went on air."

A collective gasp echoed across the stage.

"And that's not all," Josh added, looking terrified. "The network's primary multi-billion-peso corporate sponsor—the ultra-conservative retail conglomerate—just saw the raw leak. They just

issued a formal ultimatum to management: either SB19 publicly denounces Joaquin and revokes his creative contract within the hour, or they pull all corporate funding from the upcoming world tour."

Chapter 7: The Price of Silence

The backstage corridor did not simply fall quiet; the air evacuated the room as if someone had blown the emergency airlock on an aircraft.

Every single phone in the immediate vicinity began pinging in an overlapping, dissonant chorus of frantic chimes, vibration pulses, and ringtones. Production assistants froze mid-stride, headsets slipping down their necks, while the studio floor manager looked like he was contemplating faking a medical emergency just to escape the blast radius.

"Everyone into VIP Room C. Now," Pablo commanded, his voice dropping an octave into pure, unyielding leadership authority. He didn't wait for a response. He physically herded the group through the double doors, pulled the heavy acoustic deadbolt with a sharp *clack*, and drew the blackout curtains across the viewing window.

Stell collapsed onto the nearest velvet armchair, holding his phone at arm's length as if it were a live grenade. "Mother of Mary, Star of the Sea... Josh, tell me you're lying. Tell me that video was generated by an unhinged AI fan account using deepfake algorithms."

"It's not AI, Stell," Josh replied deadpan, leaning against the wall and staring at his screen with morbid fascination. "Deepfakes don't capture Ken's exact habit of resting his thumb along someone's jawline before he goes in. Plus, the resolution is so crisp you can see the reflection of the emergency exit sign in Joaquin's watch."

"Let me see," Justin muttered, squeezing between Josh and the wall to peer over his shoulder. He squinted at the screen, letting out a low, respectful whistle. "I have to admit... the framing is cinematic. Look at the dramatic backlighting against the steel locker. Joaquin, your influence on the crew's camera angles is already working

miracles."

"Justin, I will throw you out that window," Ken growled, his voice dangerously low.

Ken hadn't released Joaquin's hand. If anything, his grip had tightened, fingers locked around Joaquin's with a possessive, grounding pressure that bordered on bruising. A dark, simmering fury radiated off Ken in waves—not directed at Joaquin, and not directed at the group, but aimed squarely at the invisible boundary of corporate parasites currently trying to dictate his life.

Joaquin, for his part, remained strikingly still. His tailored suit was immaculate, his posture relaxed, but his dark eyes were calculating, running through the cascading professional implications with the speed of an executive under fire.

A frantic rapping rattled the locked door before it pushed open. Ms. Rhea, the network's senior vice president, stepped inside, flanked by two corporate legal liaisons clutching thick red folders. Her usual polished, media-trained smile was completely gone, replaced by the taut, bloodless expression of an executive whose golden goose had just stepped on a landmine.

"We have fifty-three minutes," Rhea said without preamble, gesturing for her assistants to close the door behind them. "Grand Apex Holdings is the sole corporate underwriter for SB19's sixteen-city international tour. They hold the title sponsorship, the stadium deposits in Tokyo and Los Angeles, and eighty percent of the broadcast syndication rights across Southeast Asia. The board chairman saw the raw mezzanine footage three minutes after it hit Weibo."

Pablo stepped forward, planting his feet firmly between Rhea and Ken. "The footage was illegally recorded in a private, non-broadcast VIP sector of this studio. That is a criminal breach of privacy and a direct violation of our facility security rider, Rhea."

"The legal department can sue the rogue technician tomorrow, Pablo!" Rhea shot back, her voice tightening with stress. "Tonight, the board of Grand Apex does not care about privacy riders. They

are an ultra-conservative, family-value conglomerate. Their ultimatum is absolute: 1Z Entertainment issues a signed statement stating that the footage depicts an unsolicited, unprofessional boundary breach by a third-party freelance contractor. Joaquin's creative director contract is formally revoked with cause, Ken issues a public apology for a 'momentary lapse in workplace judgment,' and the tour funding proceeds uninterrupted."

The room temperature seemed to drop ten degrees below zero.

Stell's jaw dropped in genuine horror. "They want us to throw Joaquin under the bus and call him a predator?! Are they completely insane?!"

"It protects the brand!" Rhea pleaded, looking desperately between Pablo and Ken. "It paints Ken as the victim of an aggressive contractor! The fans will rally behind him, the public will forgive a lapse in security, and the sixty-million-peso international tour package stays fully intact! It's clean, it's isolated, and it solves the problem within the hour!"

"No."

The single syllable cut through the frantic air like a guillotine blade.

Ken stepped around Pablo, his dark eyes burning with absolute, unfiltered rage. He stood at his full height, looming over the network executive with a terrifying, lethal stillness.

"Ken, be rational—" Rhea started.

"I said *no*," Ken repeated, his deep baritone vibrating with venomous certainty. "You want me to stand in front of a camera, sign a lie, and call the man I love a liability? You want me to destroy his reputation, his career, and his dignity just so some dinosaur in a boardroom can feel comfortable writing a check?"

Ken took a slow, menacing step forward, forcing Rhea to take an instinctive step back. "I would burn every single stadium contract to ash before I let you put dirt on his name. Tell Grand Apex to take their sixty million pesos and choke on it."

"Ken, shut up for one second," Joaquin said softly.

The entire room snapped their heads toward Joaquin.

Joaquin gently reached out, his hand sliding up Ken's arm, his fingers wrapping firmly around Ken's bicep. The touch was calm, authoritative, and instantly pierced through the red haze of Ken's fury.

"Rhea, give us ten minutes in private," Joaquin said, his voice entirely devoid of panic, carrying the refined weight of someone who spent his career negotiating seven-figure commercial licenses. "Pablo, take the room. Ken and I need to speak."

Pablo looked at Joaquin, searched his eyes for three seconds, and gave a single, resolute nod. "Ten minutes. Nobody talks to the press. Nobody touches Twitter."

Pablo grabbed Rhea by the elbow and efficiently steered her and the legal liaisons out into the hallway, motioning for Stell, Josh, and Justin to clear the adjoining executive lounge. The door clicked shut, leaving Ken and Joaquin alone in the muted, heavy silence of the VIP suite.

The moment the door closed, Ken spun around, his chest heaving beneath his velvet blazer. "Don't you dare."

Joaquin leaned back against the heavy mahogany conference table, folding his arms. He looked at Ken with an expression that was maddeningly calm, layered with an aching, tender fondness that only made Ken's chest ache more violently.

"Don't I dare what, Ken?" Joaquin asked quietly.

"Don't do the noble, self-sacrificing martyr routine," Ken snapped, closing the distance between them until he was standing directly between Joaquin's parted knees, towering over him, his hands coming down flat against the edge of the table on either side of Joaquin's hips. "I know how your brain works. You're already calculating how to step down quietly, take the blame, and disappear behind the scenes so SB19 gets their world tour."

Joaquin didn't flinch. He looked up into Ken's fierce, desperate eyes, his own gaze softening. He reached up, his cool fingers gently tracing the hard line of Ken's jaw, sliding up to cradle the nape of his neck.

"Ken, be realistic," Joaquin whispered, his thumb brushing over Ken's lower lip. "This isn't about pride. It's an international stadium tour. You, Pablo, Josh, Stell, and Justin have spent eight years bleeding for this. You've practiced until your joints gave out, you've slept on studio floors, you've sacrificed every shred of normal life to get to this stage. I am an established architectural photographer. I have international clients in Tokyo, Paris, and Singapore. If I walk away from this specific creative credit, my career survives. If you lose this sponsor, your brothers lose their global run."

"You think this is about a credit?!" Ken's voice cracked with raw, unvarnished intensity. He leaned down, pressing his forehead hard against Joaquin's, their breaths tangling in the narrow space between their lips. "You think I give a single damn about an arena if I have to stand on that stage knowing I betrayed the only person who sees me for who I actually am?"

Ken's hands left the table, moving up to grip Joaquin's waist, pulling him so hard against his chest that Joaquin let out a soft, sharp breath. Ken buried his face in the crook of Joaquin's neck, breathing in the scent of cedar wood, expensive citrus cologne, and pure, intoxicating warmth.

"I spent years wearing whatever mask the industry told me to wear," Ken whispered, his voice trembling with a vulnerability that tore straight through Joaquin's defenses. "Brooding. Silent. Untouchable. Then you showed up. You laughed in my face when I tried to act tough. You pulled the truth out of me behind that camera. You made my home feel like a real home."

Ken pulled back just enough to look directly into Joaquin's eyes, his dark irises blazing with an almost terrifying devotion.

"If I sign that lie to save a tour, every note I sing on that stage is garbage. Every speech I give to A'TIN about authenticity is a joke. I told you on that broadcast: you are the standard I hold everything

against. We don't hide, and we don't apologize. If they want a war over who I kiss in the dark, I'll give them a war."

Joaquin stared at him, the analytical, protective wall around his heart utterly crumbling. A slow, breathless smile broke across Joaquin's lips—wicked, brilliant, and deeply emotional. He threaded both hands into the dark silk of Ken's styled hair, pulling Ken down into a fierce, bruising kiss that tasted like defiance, adrenaline, and absolute ownership.

Ken groaned into his mouth, his arms locking around Joaquin's back like iron bands, lifting him slightly off the edge of the table as he kissed him with an unhinged, starving fervor that left them both gasping for air.

When they finally broke apart, Joaquin rested his forehead against Ken's shoulder, a low chuckle vibrating against Ken's collarbone.

"God, you really are a stubborn, arrogant bastard, aren't you?" Joaquin murmured affectionately.

"Only for you," Ken replied, his lips brushing Joaquin's earlobe with dangerous heat. "Now stop trying to break up with my job."

The side door to the lounge creaked open.

"Are you two done having a cinematic romantic epiphany?" Josh asked, sticking his head into the room while casually chewing on a handful of chocolate-covered almonds. "Because Pablo is currently using advanced corporate trigonometry on the legal team and Stell looks like he's about to faint."

Ken didn't let go of Joaquin's waist; he just turned his head to glare at Josh. "Josh, get out."

"No, actually, we're coming in," Stell declared, marching past Josh with an over-sized dry-erase board under his arm, followed closely by Justin, who was carrying three cans of iced coffee and a box of pastries.

Pablo walked in last, shutting the door firmly behind them. His blazer was off, his dress shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows,

and his eyes had the terrifying, hyper-focused gleam of a military strategist who had just found the enemy's supply line.

"Listen to me," Pablo said, clapping his hands once. "Nobody is resigning. Nobody is signing an apology. And nobody is denouncing anyone."

Stell dramatically set the whiteboard on the conference table, pointing a blue marker at Joaquin. "Because if you leave, Joaquin, Ken will revert to being a nocturnal, emotionally repressed gremlin who refuses to eat anything except instant romen and spite. For the sake of our choreography schedule, you are legally obligated to stay attached to him."

"Also," Justin added sweetly, passing a can of coffee to Joaquin, "I checked the engagement algorithms during the last twenty minutes. The leaked video currently has forty-two million views. The hashtag #KenAndJoaquin is trending number one in fourteen countries, and eighty-nine percent of the top-ranking posts are from fans demanding Grand Apex release the high-definition director's cut."

Josh smirked, leaning against the whiteboard. "A'TIN are currently threatening to boycott every shopping mall Grand Apex owns in the Philippines if they touch our tour. Two major competing international airlines just reached out to our commercial email asking if the title tour sponsorship is available for bidding."

Joaquin arched an eyebrow, looking at the scribbled engagement graphs Stell had drawn on the board. "So what you're saying is... the conservative sponsor played themselves."

"They tried to use nineteenth-century leverage against a twenty-first-century fandom," Pablo said, a ruthless, victorious smirk playing on his lips. "I just reviewed our master agreement with Grand Apex. Clause 18, Section 4: If the sponsor attempts to terminate the tour contract without bilateral consent based on non-criminal personal conduct, they are liable for an immediate fifty-percent liquidity penalty deposited directly into 1Z Entertainment's escrow account."

Pablo looked directly at Ken and Joaquin, his expression

unwavering, fierce, and proud.

"We built this company so no corporate executive could ever tell us who we're allowed to be," Pablo said softly. "We don't bow to ultimatums. Ken, are you ready to handle the press?"

Ken looked down at Joaquin, who gave him a slow, radiant, uncompromising smile.

"I'm ready," Ken said.

Twenty minutes later, the main press holding lounge of Showbiz Prime was packed to suffocating capacity. Over fifty entertainment journalists, network camera operators, and digital media correspondents were shouting over one another, flashes firing like strobe lights against the black backdrop.

Rhea stood at the side of the stage, chewing her thumbnail raw, while Grand Apex's senior vice president of public relations stood with his arms crossed, glaring daggers at the podium.

The stage doors swung open.

Ken walked out first, effortlessly commanding the room in his burgundy velvet blazer, his posture straight, relaxed, and radiating pure, magnetic confidence. Right beside him—not trailing behind, and not hiding in the shadows—walked Joaquin, his charcoal suit immaculate, exuding the quiet, lethal elegance of a man who belonged in any room he chose to enter.

Behind them stood Pablo, Josh, Stell, and Justin, a unified, unbreakable wall of solidarity.

The room exploded into a deafening roar of questions, microphones thrusting forward like spears.

"*Ken! Was the leaked mezzanine footage staged for album promotion?!*"
"*Joaquin, are you being retained by 1Z Entertainment despite the sponsor's objections?!*"
"*Is it true Grand Apex is pulling funding for the world tour?!*"

Ken stepped up to the central microphone. He didn't adjust the

stand. He didn't look down at the prepared index cards the network had placed on the lectern. With a single, fluid motion of his hand, he brushed the cards off the podium and onto the floor.

The room went dead silent.

"I'm going to make this very simple," Ken began, his low, rich baritone echoing with crystal clarity through the press speakers. "An unedited video of my private life was illegally recorded and distributed tonight. That is a crime, and our legal team is already handling the parties responsible."

He paused, letting his gaze sweep across the sea of cameras before turning slightly to look at Joaquin, whose eyes met his with steady, quiet warmth.

"What you saw in that video was not a PR stunt. It was not a lapse in judgment. And it is not something I will ever apologize for," Ken stated, his voice ringing with absolute, unshakable authority. "Joaquin Reyes is the lead creative director of our new era because his talent is unmatched. And he is by my side because that is exactly where he belongs."

A collective, stunned murmur rolled through the press corps.

Ken looked back at the main network camera, his eyes narrowing with cold, brilliant defiance.

"To any corporate sponsor who believes our music, our vision, or our humanity can be bought, censored, or threatened into silence: consider our contract terminated. We do not negotiate who we love. We will see our fans on the world tour—on our own terms."

Ken stepped back from the microphone, casually reached down, and laced his fingers firmly through Joaquin's hand in full, brilliant view of fifty flashing cameras. Together, flanked by their brothers, they turned and walked off the stage.

Back inside the private green room, the adrenaline was intoxicating.

Stell let out a war cry, throwing his arms around Justin and jumping up and down. "We did it! We just told a multi-billion-peso

corporation to go to hell on live television! That was the hottest, most terrifying thing I have ever witnessed in my entire existence!"

"Pablo," Josh laughed, holding up his phone, "the competing airline just submitted a formal sponsorship offer that's twenty percent higher than Grand Apex's original contract!"

Joaquin turned to Ken, pulling him in close by his lapels, his eyes shining with profound admiration. "You really don't know how to back down, do you?"

"Never," Ken whispered, leaning in to press a warm, lingering kiss to Joaquin's temple. "I told you. We do this together."

Before Ken's lips could find Joaquin's mouth, Pablo's encrypted emergency phone began to ring.

Pablo answered it, his smile instantly freezing as he listened to the voice on the other end. His skin went entirely pale.

"Pablo?" Josh asked, the laughter dying in his throat. "What is it?"

Pablo slowly lowered the phone, his eyes wide with shock as he looked at Ken and Joaquin.

"That was the international venue coordination bureau in Los Angeles," Pablo said, his voice trembling. "Grand Apex didn't just pull their sponsorship. They invoked an emergency moral-turpitude clause in the international stadium master lease. They just froze the primary operating bank accounts for the entire tour, locked the ticketing servers worldwide, and filed an immediate international injunction to block SB19 from boarding our flight to the United States tomorrow morning."

Chapter 8: On Their Own Terms

The silence in the green room lasted for exactly three seconds before the entire ecosystem of 1Z Entertainment shifted from shock into full-blown military mobilization.

"They filed an *ex parte* injunction in California District Court?" Pablo was already pacing the length of the room, his thumb flying

across his tablet with terrifying speed, calling up international contract appendices. "On what legal basis? The performance rider explicitly stipulates that moral clauses cannot be unilaterally enforced without a sixty-day formal mediation window!"

"Grand Apex's board chairman doesn't care about thirty-day mediation windows," Josh said grimly, refreshing a legal docket feed on his phone. "They filed an emergency petition under California's expedited civil relief statutes, claiming that the 'brand controversy' jeopardizes their proprietary ticketing platforms and commercial venue leases. They're arguing that SB19 leaving the country represents a flight of liability before contractual damages can be assessed."

"Are they completely out of their corporate minds?!" Stell shrieked, clutching his head with both hands. "We aren't fugitive international jewel thieves running from Interpol! We're five guys trying to catch a flight to Los Angeles to perform *GENTO* in an arena!"

"They don't expect the injunction to hold forever," Joaquin said. His voice was smooth, cool, and steady, cutting through the rising panic like a surgeon's scalpel. He stood beside the conference table, calmly buttoning his jacket. "It's a scorched-earth delay tactic. They know the judge won't have time to review our counter-brief before our ten o'clock morning flight. If we miss the flight, we miss the LA soundcheck, the venue default penalties trigger, and the entire six-week North American leg collapses under insurance claims. It's calculated financial strangulation."

Ken's jaw clenched so hard the muscle ticked beneath his bronze skin. His eyes were dark, burning with a lethal resolve. He turned toward Pablo. "How much do we need in liquid capital to bypass their frozen escrow accounts and clear the venue deposits directly?"

"Seventy-five million pesos by seven in the morning," Pablo answered without hesitation. "Plus, we need our legal counsel in Los Angeles to walk into that judge's chambers the second the federal courthouse opens at eight Pacific Standard Time."

"We have six hours," Justin said suddenly. He was already sitting

cross-legged on the floor, his laptop balanced on his knees, surrounded by hard drives and camera cords. His soft, boyish features had hardened into intense, razor-sharp focus. "And I think I just found Grand Apex's jugular."

Every member snapped their attention to him.

"Justin," Stell gasped, dropping down next to him. "Tell me you didn't just hack the Philippine Central Bank."

"Better," Justin replied, turning the screen toward the group. "When Joaquin and I pulled the raw mezzanine security logs after the leak, I ran an automated checksum on the broadcast transmission signal. The video wasn't leaked by a rogue network technician. The timestamp on the file export matches the private IP address assigned to Grand Apex's own executive liaison suite on the thirty-second floor."

Joaquin leaned over Justin's shoulder, his dark eyes narrowing as he read the diagnostic code. "They didn't just find out about the video tonight. They manufactured the recording using high-gain directional surveillance equipment they installed three days ago without a permit."

"Which means," Pablo breathed, a cold, predatory smile spreading across his face, "Grand Apex didn't react to an unexpected PR crisis. They engaged in corporate wiretapping, intentional breach of artist privacy riders, and bad-faith extortion. It's a criminal offense in the Philippines and a direct violation of California's Unfair Competition Law."

"Josh, Stell," Pablo barked, slipping effortlessly into full CEO command. "You're on digital offensive. Get on 1Z's official channels. No defensive explanations, no panic. We post the verified digital audit proving corporate surveillance. Rally A'TIN. Let the world see exactly who tried to break into our private space."

"Already on it," Josh grinned, his thumbs already hammering away at the company's encrypted communications grid. "I'm coordinating with our international fan admins in Seoul, Tokyo, and LA. By three in the morning, Grand Apex will be trending globally under

#CorporateExtortion."

"I'll coordinate the live streaming updates," Stell added, his initial panic burning off into pure, theatrical ferocity. "If Grand Apex wants a public spectacle, I will give them a Broadway tragedy starring their falling stock prices."

"I'm calling the Los Angeles venue management directly," Pablo said, grabbing his briefcase. "The arena general manager has been our personal friend since our last showcase. If we show him Grand Apex's criminal liability, he'll accept 1Z's direct letter of credit and lock Grand Apex out of the stadium master lease by sunrise."

As the room erupted into an organized frenzy of legal drafts, phone calls, and international routing confirmations, Ken felt a warm hand slide around his wrist, pulling him gently but firmly toward the darkened glass balcony overlooking the Manila skyline.

The midnight air was cool and humid, carrying the distant hum of traffic and the faint glow of neon billboards across the city.

Ken leaned against the steel railing, his burgundy velvet blazer discarded over an outdoor chair, the top three buttons of his black dress shirt undone to let the night breeze cool his skin. The city below looked boundless, alive with millions of lights, but the only thing Ken could focus on was the steady, grounding presence of the man standing beside him.

Joaquin rested his forearms on the balcony ledge, looking out over the sprawling metropolis. In the dim ambient glow of the rooftop lights, the sharp contours of his face were softened by exhaustion, but his eyes held an unwavering, quiet depth.

"You look like you're about to fight an entire boardroom with your bare hands," Joaquin murmured softly, turning his head to look at Ken.

"If it meant getting you out of their crosshairs, I would," Ken said, his deep baritone rough around the edges. He turned, stepping closer until his chest was inches from Joaquin's shoulder. "I'm not letting you carry the weight of this tour, Joaquin. This isn't your

fault. None of it is."

"Ken, look at me," Joaquin said, straightening up and reaching out to cradle the back of Ken's neck. His fingers were warm, threading into Ken's hair with a slow, deliberate tenderness that instantly melted the tension coiling in Ken's shoulders. "Do you think I regret a single second of this? Do you think I regret kissing you on your couch, or on that mezzanine, or standing next to you under those studio lights?"

Ken's breath caught in his throat. He looked down into Joaquin's dark, luminous eyes, finding nothing but fierce, unadulterated certainty.

"I didn't step into your life to be a fragile secret you have to protect from the world," Joaquin whispered, his thumb brushing along the sharp edge of Ken's cheekbone. "I knew who you were. I knew the storm that surrounds everything you touch. And I chose to walk right into the center of it because you are worth every single bolt of lightning."

Ken let out a ragged exhale, his hands coming up to grip Joaquin's hips, pulling him flush against his body. The contact was electric, a sudden, desperate grounding in the middle of a swirling tempest.

"I spent my entire career afraid that if people saw what I wanted—what I actually felt—everything I built would crumble," Ken confessed, his voice dropping to an intimate, raw rasp. He leaned in, pressing his forehead against Joaquin's temple, breathing in that familiar, intoxicating scent of cedar wood and citrus. "Then you showed up. And suddenly, losing an arena doesn't scare me. Losing you does."

Joaquin smiled, a soft, breathless sound against Ken's ear. He slid his hands down Ken's neck, flattening his palms against the heat of Ken's chest, feeling the heavy, rhythmic thud of his heart.

"You're not losing me, Felip," Joaquin murmured, using Ken's real name with an intimacy that sent a shiver straight down Ken's spine. "And you're not losing your tour, either. We don't turn love into a martyr's sacrifice. We take the stage, we make our art, and we do it

on our own terms."

Ken lifted his head, his dark eyes searching Joaquin's face. The fierce, uncompromising passion in Joaquin's expression made something wild and triumphant flare to life in Ken's chest.

Ken leaned down and captured Joaquin's lips in a deep, searing kiss.

It wasn't rushed or panicked; it was deliberate, possessive, and thick with an unspoken promise. Joaquin parted his lips with a low, quiet gasp, his fingers clutching the fabric of Ken's shirt as Ken pulled him closer, aligning their bodies until there wasn't a single inch of doubt left between them. Ken kissed him like a man claiming his future, tasting the adrenaline, the defiance, and the profound, unbreakable tenderness they had built in secret and forged in public fire.

When they finally parted, their foreheads resting together, Ken's lips curled into a slow, wicked smirk.

"You really are the most dangerous thing that's ever happened to me, Reyes," Ken breathed.

"Keep talking like that," Joaquin replied, his eyes sparkling with playful arrogance, "and I might just demand top billing on your album credits."

The glass balcony door slid open with a dramatic *clatter*.

"Praise the heavens and all the saints, put your shirts back on!" Stell yelled, bursting onto the terrace with a celebratory carton of dim sum in one hand and a tablet in the other. "It's five in the morning, we haven't slept in thirty-six hours, and Pablo just committed legal homicide!"

Ken didn't let go of Joaquin's waist; he simply arched a brow at Stell. "Explain."

Josh and Justin stepped onto the balcony behind Stell, their faces lit with triumphant exhaustion.

"The emergency federal hearing in Los Angeles just concluded,"

Josh announced, taking a massive bite of a steamed bun. "Judge Alvarez looked at Justin's forensic digital evidence of Grand Apex's illegal wiretapping, looked at Grand Apex's bogus moral clause petition, and dismissed their injunction with extreme prejudice in less than twelve minutes."

Justin beamed, holding up his screen. "Not only did she throw out the injunction, but she also ordered Grand Apex to immediately unfreeze 1Z's operating escrow under threat of contempt of court. And because they breached the performance rider by filing a frivolous action, the court declared our contract null and void without penalty."

Pablo stepped onto the terrace last, his tie completely undone, holding two steaming cups of coffee and an official document bearing three digital gold seals.

"The competing airline just wired the full title sponsorship package directly into our private corporate account," Pablo said, his voice ringing with quiet, hard-earned pride. "They signed a three-year global partnership with zero creative restrictions and full indemnification. The ticketing servers are unlocked. Tokyo sold out in four minutes, and Los Angeles just added a second stadium date."

Pablo looked at Ken and Joaquin, his dark eyes brimming with deep, brotherly respect.

"Our flight boards in four hours," Pablo smiled. "And we fly as our own masters."

By seven-thirty in the morning, 1Z Entertainment released its official, final statement to the international press.

It did not include apologies. It did not offer explanations of anyone's private moments. Instead, it was an elegant, ironclad declaration of independence:

"1Z Entertainment confirms that all contractual ties with Grand Apex Holdings have been formally terminated following material breaches of security and integrity by the sponsor. SB19's sixteen-city international world tour proceeds as scheduled under our new global title partners.

Artistic expression, personal autonomy, and human dignity are not commodities for corporate negotiation. SB19 will always belong to our music, our vision, and the community that stands beside us. Our private lives remain ours; our stage belongs to the world.

We will see you in Los Angeles."

Accompanying the statement was a single, high-definition promotional photograph shot by Joaquin Reyes: the five members of SB19 standing tall on a raw concrete platform, silhouetted against a brilliant sunrise, unbreakable and completely united.

At nine-forty-five AM, Terminal 3 of Ninoy Aquino International Airport was a scene of controlled pandemonium.

Hundreds of A'TIN had gathered along the departure concourse, holding banners in shades of blue and gold, chanting SB19's name, their cheers echoing through the high glass ceilings. When the black security vans pulled up to the VIP gate, the roar from the crowd was deafening—a thunderous wave of love, validation, and pure solidarity.

Inside the private international departures lounge, the group finally dropped their carry-ons onto the plush couches, basking in the cool hum of the jet bridge.

"I need everyone to know," Stell declared, dramatically collapsing across an entire sectional sofa while wearing over-sized designer sunglasses, "that if anyone wakes me up before we cross the International Date Line, I will personally throw their passport into the Pacific Ocean."

"You won't throw anything, Stell," Josh chuckled, pulling out his portable gaming console. "You'll be awake in twenty minutes asking the flight attendant if they have extra warm nuts and requesting face masks."

Justin was happily snapping candid Polaroids of the tarmac, humming the intro chords to *W.Y.A.T*, completely unfazed by the whirlwind of the last twenty-four hours.

Near the boarding gate, standing by the panoramic glass window overlooking the massive Boeing 777 being fueled for takeoff, Ken stood with his hands in the pockets of his dark tailored trousers, watching the morning sunlight spill across the runway.

A footstep sounded beside him. Joaquin leaned his shoulder lightly against Ken's, holding two travel mugs of black coffee. He handed one to Ken, their fingers brushing with a familiar, effortless warmth.

"First class seat 2A," Joaquin murmured, checking his boarding pass with a slight smirk. "Right next to seat 2B. Who arranged that seating chart?"

"I might have had a very stern conversation with the logistics manager," Ken replied smoothly, taking a slow sip of his coffee before looking over at Joaquin.

Joaquin was dressed in an understated black cashmere sweater, a dark coat draped over his arm, looking striking, unbothered, and entirely at home in Ken's world. The public firestorm had come for them with all the fury of corporate greed, and they had walked out of the flames without giving up a single piece of who they were.

"Ready for twelve hours in the air?" Joaquin asked softly.

Ken turned fully toward him. With the members laughing loudly just a few feet away and the entire world waiting on the other side of the ocean, Ken didn't hesitate. He reached out, his hand sliding warmly to the back of Joaquin's neck, pulling him in close until their lips were barely an inch apart.

"With you?" Ken whispered, his dark eyes gleaming with an open, brilliant promise. "I'm ready for whatever comes next."

Ken closed the distance, pressing a soft, lingering, utterly fearless kiss to Joaquin's lips in the warm morning light of the terminal. Joaquin smiled against his mouth, kissing him back with the quiet certainty of two people who had built something real, something untouchable.

Behind them, the flight crew announced the final boarding call.

Flanked by their brothers, their music, and a future entirely their own, Ken and Joaquin turned together toward the open jet bridge, stepping forward into the wide, endless sky.